

Irish Independent - Wednesday 20th May 2009

In my Opinion: More migrant teachers needed to reflect the new Ireland by Wale Mogaji

Recent experience of inward migration has redefined Ireland's population profile in a much more diversified way. There are now 188 nationalities living in Ireland, more religious beliefs are visible and the population has become multilingual. It is on this premise that the Government has called all stakeholders in education to a timely development of a National Intercultural Education Strategy.

In order that an intercultural strategy be sustainable, it need not be time bound, for instance, it must not be a consideration only in an economic upturn or downturn similar to the employment integration strategy. Society as a whole must take ownership of this approach to education.

It is also important that such a strategy is seen as integral to the overall school administration strategy across Ireland. It should also be practical so as to unequivocally explain 'difficult' terms like asylum seekers, refugees, unaccompanied minors and family reunification.

The employment of more teachers from migrant backgrounds would reflect the intercultural nature of present day classrooms. The Government may wish to consider establishing a scheme to recruit teachers from migrant backgrounds, such as the Refugees into Teaching in Scotland programme.

This would be expedient as skilled people with refugee backgrounds already live here and hope to work and contribute to their communities given their vast repertoire of skills and qualifications.

This approach could also be complemented by developing a system which would allow for the recruitment of migrant liaison officers and regional coordinators for schools who would advise on migrant specific issues. These individuals could be encouraged to take on such roles voluntarily in the first instance as a pilot initiative.

In line with the principle that aspirations and expectations should be the same for all children, migrants' values, cultures, history, politics, economics and geography should be inculcated into the existing curriculum towards identifying with and understanding the realities of migration both for Irish and migrant children.

The 'Aquis Communautaire' which brings together laws in the European Union stipulates that Member States refer to Directive 77/486/EEC which requires that children of migrants from EU member states have the opportunity of the language of the host country and their mother tongue.

This idea could be developed by organising cultural diversity days, and special guidance and counselling days focusing on mentoring by indigenous Irish people and prominent migrants.

As the strategy is to be reflected at all levels, adult migrants, particularly refugees should have alternative sources of grants if they do not qualify for the Higher Education grant or free fee scheme.

This is the case in some countries including the Netherlands, UK and Canada. In the same vein, clear cut rights for children over 16 years to progress automatically in their studies and to pay EU-agreed fees when their immigration applications are yet to be determined, should be legislated for.

This, like other aspects of the intercultural education strategy would be compliant with the best interests of the child and with Ireland's obligations under the EU.

Given the small numbers of people who would fall into this category it would appear to be a humane and relatively easy step for Government to take.

Wale Mogaji is Head of Communications and Integration with the Refugee Information Service

- Wale Mogaji